

ALTERNATIVE B: LOWER MISSISSIPPI DELTA NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA

Heritage areas form a cohesive, nationally distinctive landscape arising from patterns of human activity shaped by geography. This alternative is offered in recognition of the distinctive landscapes of the Delta and the human interaction with that landscape over thousands of years. It is recognized that heritage areas have been organized and designated in several areas of the country over the last 10 years and although the concept is a viable one, it has not been undertaken within such a large geographic area. Local and regional support for a Delta wide heritage area designation must take into consideration the large area and the need for special coordination and communication challenges inherent in such an undertaking.

The Lower Mississippi Delta is a vast and vital part of the American landscape. This broad alluvial valley provides habitat and ecological support for a wide variety of flora, fauna, and aquatic species. The Mississippi River forms the most important bird and waterfowl migration corridor on the continent. At the same time the Delta's cultural traditions area as rich as its natural resources. This is a land of converging cultures with a unique complexity and density of history, prehistory, and cultural expression.

The richness of the region's natural, cultural, and historical resources and the stories of the Delta that make this region worthy of national attention may offer an opportunity to organize and coordinate heritage tourism efforts within a National Heritage Area configuration. This heritage area would focus on the Lower Mississippi River systems, the natural and cultural landscapes that reflect the river's influences over time, and the rich diversity of people whose traditions have helped shape those landscapes.

VISITOR EXPERIENCE

As in alternative A this alternative would use the nine concepts based on the "Stories of the Delta" as the core of the visitor experience for

the Lower Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area.

ORIENTATION/INFORMATION

The orientation/information aspect of this alternative would be the same as alternative A with heavy emphasis on utilizing existing tourist information centers. For this alternative a lower Mississippi Delta Heritage Commission would take the lead in disseminating information and providing comprehensive orientation to the Delta and its resources.

INTERPRETATION AND EDUCATION

The interpretation and education programs outlined in alternative A would also apply to this alternative.

RESOURCE STEWARDSHIP

Historic, Cultural, and Natural Resources

Historic, cultural, and natural resource stewardship efforts would be the same as in alternative A. The Lower Mississippi Delta Heritage Area Commission could allow for more comprehensive and coordinated efforts.

FACILITY DEVELOPMENT

As in alternative A this alternative proposes that existing tourist information centers along the primary highway systems in the Delta be used to disseminate information about the Delta heritage area. No new facility development is proposed for this alternative.

MANAGEMENT APPROACH

Lower Mississippi Delta Heritage Commission

Under this management approach, a Lower Mississippi Delta Heritage Commission would

be created through enactment of federal legislation. This Deltawide entity would be established to oversee, coordinate, provide direction, and guide the development of a comprehensive information and orientation network, an interpretation and education program, a historical and cultural preservation program, a natural resource conservation and education program, and a tourism economic development/marketing initiative. Leadership under this approach would be provided at the federal level with extensive involvement at all levels of state and local government, educational institutions, the private sector, and interested groups and individuals.

Membership

The commission would represent a wider partnership of public and private resources than alternative A and would provide a framework to bring together existing public and private sector initiatives and programs and create new ones as needed. Commission members would be appointed by the secretary of the interior and would reflect the rich cultural diversity of the Delta. The secretary would appoint commission members after considering recommendations from a variety of sources to ensure broad representation of all levels of government and the private sector.

It is suggested that the commission be comprised of a representative from each state government, a person from each state representing local government, representatives from the major federal government agencies in lower Mississippi Delta, as well as a person representing the public from each state. It would be desirable if the commission were comprised of professionals from education, tourism, economic development, arts and the humanities, historic preservation, parks and recreation, transportation, business, and agriculture. The greater and wider variety of partners at all levels would enable leveraging resources and moving forward on many fronts.

An important partner for this management approach would be the region's universities, colleges, and community colleges. This alternative presents an opportunity to establish

and nourish strong partnerships among tourism, heritage preservation, and education communities. Historically black colleges and universities in the study area, the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi, the new Delta Studies Center at Arkansas State University, Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, as well as others, contain existing infrastructures for heritage and historic research, economic analysis, and worker training — all important elements for successfully implementing this alternative. Membership of educational institutions on a Lower Mississippi Delta Heritage Commission would bring an added dimension vital to protecting and promoting the region's important resources.

Due to the vastness of the lower Mississippi Delta and the abundance of resources and stories, it is suggested that the commission appoint seven committees to work closely with commission members to plan and implement the concepts presented earlier. Committee chairpersons would be drawn from all seven states and could be appointed by the commission after receiving input from concerned agencies, organizations, and individuals.

Functions

The commission would have a formalized management structure that would define the roles and responsibilities of all the different participants and coordinate their efforts. The commission would have its own staff managed by an executive director. Staff members would be skilled in providing assistance in planning, marketing, historic preservation, tourism, economic development, and grant writing.

The commission would be responsible for: (1) preparation and approval of a comprehensive management plan for the lower Mississippi Delta. The plan would define the desired visitor experience; provide direction for tourism and economic development, historic preservation, and natural resource conservation; identify education initiatives and programs; determine the level and sources of funding for implementing the nine concepts; (2) making loans and grants for the purpose of

conserving and protecting sites, buildings, and objects which are related to the natural, cultural, historical, and recreational heritage of the areas; (3) coordinating the activities of federal, state, and local governments as well as educational institutions, private sector initiatives, and public interest projects which further historic preservation, visitor use, preservation, and compatible economic revitalization; (4) providing advice and assistance in preparation of loan or grant applications; (5) disseminating information related to heritage tourism efforts throughout the Delta region, the country, and internationally, utilizing a variety of media, including, but not limited to, Internet technology, newsletters, brochures, television and radio programs, CDs and (6) entering into cooperative agreements with others to purchase, rent, or receive donations of properties or interests in properties for conveyance to an appropriate public agency for use for public purposes.

Funding

Federal funding for commission activities, including salaries, planning and implementation could be up to \$1.5 million per year not to exceed ten years. The investment of federal funding is intended to provide for planning, set-up, and initial seed money for implementation. It is envisioned that these funds will be available to appropriate projects on a matching basis, whether it be a financial match and/or in-kind services. The commission would also be eligible for technical assistance on an annual basis based on the merits of their projects judged against other heritage area projects. An economic plan would be prepared concurrently with the comprehensive management plan (CMP) to identify potential public and private funding sources for implementation of the CMP.

At the conclusion of the initial 10-year period, a private/nonprofit group could be federally chartered to further fund raising and investment efforts, establish continued economic analysis and marketing strategies, and serve as project managers for implementing the heritage tourism projects proposed in the CMP. This group would be

self-sustaining and would continue to operate on a Deltawide basis. It is hoped that the staff from the commission would continue to function as outlined above.

Estimated Costs

Initial federal investment for this management alternative would be \$15 million (\$1.5 million x 10 years). It is recognized that current funding levels for existing heritage areas is not this high, however, the large geographic area and increased coordination and communication efforts would warrant this larger funding amount. In addition, because this alternative expands the focus of Delta heritage tourism beyond tourism development and marketing the cost to the federal government would be more than alternative A. These funds would be used for staff salaries and office set up, administration cost for the commission, comprehensive management plan, and economic plan preparation as well as initial implementation of projects.

It must be recognized that the cost of implementing the CMP would require funding beyond the initial \$15 million federal investment and would require a public/private partnership approach. The economic plan developed by the commission would give direction for initiating and sustaining funding for the heritage area.

The following are examples of projects that might be identified in the CMP that would need specific funding strategies:

- Information/orientation media and materials
- Interpretive media and materials
- Educational media and materials
- Signing and/or any facility development along heritage corridors and routes
- Resource surveys and national register nominations